

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday, December 11, 2011 For or Against?

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters: it is two weeks until the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week I quoted from St. Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome and an important Church Father in the 5th century, on the subject of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and how we must prepare for the Nativity. I will do so again this morning, but first I want to tell you a bit more about this early Holy Father.

I already mentioned last week St. Leo's meeting with Attila the Hun, whom Christians called "The Scourge of God"—this meeting was a successful attempt on the part of the Pope to save the city of Rome from pillage and conquest. Attila was called "The Scourge of God" because the Christians of Rome had fallen into immorality, debauchery, and contention, and the invasion of the barbarians was seen as God's punishment. Also, what I forgot to mention last week was that when the pagan Attila was asked by his men why he capitulated to the old bishop, he said that at the side of Pope Leo he saw the Apostle Peter holding a sword and looking at him threateningly!

Leo came from Tuscany—a part of Italy well known to American lovers of Tuscan cuisine and to armchair travelers. He entered the lower ranks of the clergy as a youth and quickly rose to the rank of archdeacon—which, in Rome, meant that he was close to the doctrinal controversies of the time, archdeacons being among the very most important clergy in Rome at that particular time. When, in 440 A.D., the then Bishop of Rome, Pope Celestine, died, the faithful of the diocese or Rome unanimously elected Leo. (This was long before the election of the Bishops of Rome was confined to the College of Cardinals, a much later development.)

During his reign he had to deal with threats from barbarians like Attila the Hun as well as serious doctrinal disputes, all of which he appropriately entered into in order to faithfully defend the Holy Faith, and the people of God, from error. I won't go into the details of these dogmatic difficulties, although they are interesting, but when St. Leo died, after twenty-one



years as Bishop of Rome, he left a diocese—and much of Italy, as well—in a far healthier state than he had found it when he became Pope. His efforts to defend correct doctrine were largely successful, and this was both gratefully valued and accepted by the Eastern Christian Empire, whose headquarters was in Constantinople, where a great deal of the doctrinal trouble had emerged in the first place.

It's very important for us to know about people like Leo and the early Christians, the early Church. There were simply magnificent heroes in those days, you know, and not only just among the martyrs. There were many bishops and priests who stood up to immorality and tyranny, "speaking truth to power," as the saying goes. My own patron saint, Ambrose of Milan, was another of them. Oh how we need such bishops—and Orthodox patriarchs—today! But equally important are the words, the writings, and the sermons of these heroes of the Faith. Last week I quoted something from the writings of St. Leo, and I would like for us to look at another very short excerpt this morning.

Concerning the Nativity Fast (which was already in existence in his time—therefore very early in Church history), Leo wrote:

"Four periods [in the seasons of the year] have been set aside as times of abstinence, so that over the course of the year we might recognize that we are constantly in need of purification, and that amid life's distractions, we should always strive by means of fasting and acts of charity to extirpate sin, sin which is multiplied in our transitory flesh and in our impure desires."

He also pointed out that the Nativity Fast is to be seen as a thankful sacrifice to God in return for the autumn harvest. This is a "thankfulness" that we also express in our secular Thanksgiving Day in our times. Though few of us are farmers today, and few of us raise much or even any of our own food, yet we still need to be thankful. And this holy hierarch added, "Just as the Lord has generously granted us abundance of the fruits of the earth, so should we, during the time of this Fast, be generous to the poor."

Even though we only have two weeks of this fasting season left, it is not too late to start fasting in the Orthodox style (if we haven't yet done so), nor is it too late to reap the spiritual



benefits and graces of this fast, as part of our important preparation for the Feast of the Lord's birth...

However, as I also mentioned last Sunday, the fasting part of this season of preparation is actually not the most important part, though it should not be dispensed with or kept frivolously. The most important thing to do during this season is to prepare our hearts and souls for Jesus Christ to be born, not just in a stable but within *us*, within the very core of who and what we are.

Now there are a number of what I call non-mainstream or "out there" church groups—I'm thinking at the moment especially about the Jehovah's Witnesses—as well as some rather ignorant Christian so-called "scholars"—who tell us that the celebration of Christ's birth on December 25 was *merely* the taking over or "baptizing" by the Church of an ancient pagan Roman festival at the end of December, for which reason it is, as the Jehovah's Witnesses maintain, actually a sin to observe Christmas. (By the way, the Puritans also believed this.) While it is true that the early Church was concerned to substitute the celebration of the Lord's birth in place of the rather rowdy and immoral pagan festival—and there's nothing at all wrong with this wisdom on the Church's part—it isn't by any means the whole story. Let's look a few simple historical facts:

The observance of the birth of Christ goes back to the time of the Apostles themselves, as we read in the ancient *Apostolic Constitutions* (Section 3, 13): "Brethren, observe the feastsdays; and first of all the Birth of Christ, which you are to celebrate on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month." In another place it also says, "Celebrate the day of the Nativity of Christ, on which unseen grace is given man by the birth of the Word of God from the Virgin Mary for the salvation of the world." It was always known, from the very beginning, that Christ's birth took place in deep winter which, even in the Holy Land was a time of cold and short days with long nights. There are those today who insist that actually we don't know when the Lord was born? But how would the Virgin Mary not have known and remember? And it was she who told the evangelists, when they were writing the Gospels, so the sure knowledge of when Jesus was born was always known and carefully preserved and followed.



In the second century, we find St Clement of Alexandria stating authoritatively that the day of the Nativity of Christ is December 25. In the third century, St Hippolytus of Rome mentions the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, and appoints the Gospel readings for this day from the opening chapters of St Matthew—and these readings have remained the same for Orthodox Christians to this very day.

In the year 302 A.D., during the persecution of Christians by the savage Roman Emperor Maximian, 20,000 Christians of Nicomedia were burned in a church on Christmas Day itself. In that same century, after the Church had received freedom of religion and had become the official religion in the Roman Empire, there is universal evidence in the writings of the Holy Fathers of the celebration of the Nativity, although it wasn't until the *Codex* (an ancient legal manuscript) of the Emperor Theodosius, in 438 A.D., and then again Emperor Justinian in 535, that this celebration was decreed by law civil law to be observed everywhere. But this does not mean that it wasn't already being observed.

However, we should also note the interesting fact that during the first *three* centuries, in the Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Cyprus, the Nativity was combined together with the Feast of His Baptism on January 6, called the "Theophany" ("Manifestation of God"). This was because of an ancient tradition that Christ was baptized on the anniversary of His birth.

So, when you see the annual late December cover stories in "Time" magazine and other sources, which routinely pooh-pooh the historic traditions preserved by the Church concerning Christ's birth...don't pay any attention. In fact, don't buy magazines that promote this kind of faithlessness, nor watch television programs (I'm thinking particularly of some of the really blasphemous howlers on the so-called "History" Channel) that repeat these attacks on the Scriptures and traditional Christianity. Rather, let us keep attention on the both the actual facts as well as the ancient and received traditions of our holy fathers and forefathers in the Faith.



For Christmas of 1999, the late Blessed Patriarch Pavel of Serbia (whose canonization is being actively considered by the Orthodox Church now), wrote some very wise words about what our attention should be on at this time of year. Beginning with this quotation from Scripture: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." -John 6:68), Patriarch Pavel continued:

"Persons and events come and go with the relentless march of time. That which today seems important and crucial may be completely forgotten tomorrow. Persons regarded by their contemporaries as influential and powerful are forgotten, as if they never existed. History brings and then carries away everything with itself, it concocts and then abandons to oblivion. Everything appears temporary and relative, even we ourselves. Man can carry on in various ways with the pessimism of history, but it is far more important how God sees history. By His constant presence and action in history God, through what only appears like a meaningless course of events, prepares the way that leads toward a predetermined goal. By His entering into history He has transformed history so that particular events are not relative and temporary, but on the contrary, they are unique, unrepeatable and of crucial importance both for God and for man. God's presence in history cures history itself of its natural pessimism.

"And precisely today, here and now, for the two thousandth time, we celebrate and remember the event that divides history in two; the event so significant that we count the years from it and now complete the second millennium. Two thousand years have passed since that night when history's greatest miracle took place in that cave near Bethlehem, when the Son of God Himself came and put on flesh and became like one of us and 'dwelt among us.' (John 1:14) He is none other than the eternal and uncreated Son, the Word or Logos of God, through Whom all things were made. Since that night nothing in human life and history is as it was before. The 'Sun of Righteousness'(Malachi 4:2) was born to us and all the depths of human fallenness and struggle against God have been filled by His warmth and light. From that night on, all human life and the history of every nation comes down to only one dilemma, to one simple question: Are you for or against Christ? One simple question, but a question so crucial that our entire life and the future of our people hinges upon it. That question overshadows and defines every historical period of the past twenty centuries.

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"For or against Him?"

This, brothers and sisters, is the question we must ask, *and answer*, in our own hearts today, as we continue to really prepare—or not prepare, as the case might be!—for the Nativity of Christ.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.